

## **SJDC Children’s Court Judge Catherine Begaye named “Reunification Hero”**

Second Judicial District Presiding Children’s Court Judge Catherine Begaye has been designated a 2022 “Reunification Hero” by the American Bar Association’s Center on Children and the Law.

This designation recognizes the work Judge Begaye does to facilitate the best possible outcomes for New Mexico families who encounter the state’s child welfare system.

The ABA Center on Children and the Law announces a group of Reunification Heroes each June, which it has designated National Reunification Month, a time for “recognizing the people and efforts around the country that help families to stay together.”

This year’s list includes parents, child welfare professionals and even youth from eighteen states across the country. The center published interviews with each hero on its [website](#).



**Judge Catherine Begaye**

In a statement announcing Judge Begaye’s selection, the center said, “Judge Begaye works to collaborate with all stakeholders to promote the best outcomes for the cases she presides over.”

Judge Begaye confirmed that statement in her interview, in which she credits all entities in New Mexico’s child welfare system—from attorneys, to the Children’s Youth and Families Department staff, tribal representatives, and the Courts—with working together to build positive support systems for New Mexico families.

### **Distinguished legal career**

The interview also offers details of Judge Begaye’s legal career, which began with a stint as a Public Defender, representing juveniles and adults in District and Appellate courts.

It was a talk with a Children’s Court Judge following a case involving a youth involved in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems that inspired Judge Begaye to go into private practice. There, she found her calling working with Native families in the abuse and neglect arena.

Judge Begaye initially joined the Second Judicial District Court as a Children’s Court Hearing Officer. As a hearing officer, Judge Begaye helped establish New Mexico’s first Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) Court. She was appointed to the bench in January 2021, and was named Presiding Judge of Children’s Court in May of 2022.

“I am honored that the ABA’s Center on Children and the Law selected me as a 2022 Reunification Hero,” Judge Begaye said. “However, this award really reflects the work being done throughout New Mexico’s child welfare system. All of our partners in this system recognize that the best outcome for children is to be part of an intact, supportive family—and they work to make that happen whenever possible.”

Second Judicial District Court Chief Judge Marie Ward said, “Judge Begaye truly is a Reunification Hero. Her work in helping to build culturally sensitive support systems for families in ICWA Court certainly qualifies for that designation. However, she works just as hard at reaching positive outcomes in all her cases, for all families. Simply put, Judge Begaye cares deeply about the welfare of children and their families, and it shows in everything she does.”